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AUTHOR Daniell, Beth
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ABSTRACT

A number of issues must be considered if those in the profession are to construct a theoretically and pedagogically sound definition of literacy as a word and a concept. The profession agrees that literacy is the encoding and decoding of meaning, but there is little agreement on the term "meaning." Sociolinguists define literacy as a cluster of linguistic, psychological, and social skills that rely on the conventions of the alphabet and of print, but also on purpose, difficulty, and interest. Other problems in defining the term are the differences and the relationships between the skills required for reading and those required for writing, and the question of permanence, or retention, of these skills. Literacy is distinct from mastery of the standard dialect, and it is not schooling, cognition, or merely "reading." Neither is it the same as culture. What seems to emerge from these distinctions, however, is a connection between literacy and culture. Among the cultural determinants of literacy are religion, economics, and politics. Only by searching the maze of relationships among humans and their cultures can the profession move toward a definition of literacy. (HTH)

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Beth Daniell
Dept. of English
Univ. of Texas
Austin, TX 78712
NCTE, Detroit
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Toward a Definition of Literacy

As you know, literacy has recently become, once again, the focus of controversy at the local, state, and national levels. This is a controversy directly involving those of us who teach literature and composition, i.e. reading and writing. The question I wish to pose in this paper is, What is the meaning of this term, literacy?

In most popular discussions, I find, the word is simply not defined. In academic discussions the word literacy usually means something like "the highest forms of critical reading and the production of theoretical, expository prose." Hence, not only freshmen, but also graduate students are deemed "illiterate." Such a defintion, however, seems inadequate, when, in the real world, even the most literate among us hire attorneys to read and write our legal documents.

It occurs to me, then, that perhaps we don't really have a clear definition and that this causes us to give our students and society mixed messages about literacy is and what it can do. This observation leads to a question: If we can't define literacy, can we measure it? From which follows another question: Is there, in fact, a literacy crisis?

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In 1976, Richard Ohmann said no. He said then that the test scores used to document the literacy crisis were, in actuality, measures of social and economic changes, not of changes in literacy itself. Ohmann concluded, "The Literacy Crisis Is a Fiction If Not a Hoax."

More recently, such well-known personalities as Ted Koppel, Ronald Reagan, and E.D. Hirsch have accepted both the test scores and the conclusion that a literacy crisis is abroad in the land. As far as I know, Koppel has offered no solution. Reagan has advocated school prayer and more discipline. Hirsch's answer is what he calls "cultural literacy"--that is, a national curriculum designed to give all American students the same knowledge so that educators can then produce the kinds of literacy skills the academic community and the middle-class society deem appropriate.

In contrast to this "top-down" solution, other scholars, like Shirley Brice Heath, for example, argue for "botto -up" literacy--that is, literacy instruction grounded in the students' own discourse and focused on the students' own concerns. Such an approach, these scholars say, allows students to create important uses for reading and writing in their own lives. Thus instruction becomes effective.

Now, back to my original question: What are we talking about when we talk about literacy? I want to get at this question by surveying a number of issues which we must consider if we, individually and collectively, are to construct a theoretically and pedagogically sound definition of literacy, both as a word and as a concept.

Since our ordinary use of the word seems not help, let us try a more basic approach. Probably, we would agree that literacy is the encoding and decoding of meaning in graphic symbols. This, of course, requires familiarity with the technology of the alphabet and of the conventions of script and print. But if literacy is encoding and decoding meaning, what do we mean by meaning? Again, there is little, if any, agreement. Personally, I like Robert Bracewell's explanation of meaning as the motivating force behind the language arts, listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Bracewell says that the search for meaning is the attempt "to understand who one is and what place one is to take in the world." But still this doesn't help us much in efforts to say what reading and writing are.

Sociolinguist Michael Stubbs defines literacy as "a cluster of skills--linguistic, psychological, and social." Stubbs reminds us, too, that these skills rely not only on the techonologies I mentioned before, but also on three other factors--purpose, difficulty, and interest. We might even be more specific about the components of a literacy event--the nature of the text, the function of the literacy event, the context in which the literacy event takes place, the participants (reader and wirter, including the relative status of each), and motivation (such things as boredom, nostalgia desire for information).

In addition to these, other problems, often ignored by both researchers and theorists, affect a definition of literacy. One of these problems is the difference in the skills required for reading and those required for writing and the relationship

of these skills to one another. The other problem is the question of permanence, or retention, of these skills.

Apparently, then, even an analysis of what we agree on about literacy raises complications. And these complications only multiply when we start to look at what literacy is not--that is, when we begin to make distinctions between literacy and the things closely associated with it.

First, literacy is distinct from mastery of the standard dialect. This distinction is not merely theoretical. Scholars of language, like Trudgeill and Labov, cite examples of literacy acquired and used without active possession of the standard. In fact, Stubbs points out, correctly in my own case, that present day literacy in Latin doesn't even depend on knowledge of the spoken forms.

Second, literacy is not schooling. The important research by Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole among the Vai people of Liberia shows that literacy can be acquired without schooling, something we in the United States are likely to forget. But Scribner and Cole's research shows us something else as well, and that is that certain types of problem-solving skills which we in the West think of as consequences of literacy are in fact only consequences of Western styles of schooling, not of literacy per se.

As a matter of fact, many anthropological studies seem to be saying that the connections between literacy and abstract thinking are not as close as some believe. For example, according some theories of literacy, the ability to classify abstractly is a result of being able to read and write. But Keith Basso's

research into the word games of Apache children reveals classification skills based on highly abstract principles. And, if you are from my part of the country, where literacy has been inaccessible to certain segments of the population, you probably know first-hand, as I do, that critical thinking--defined here as questioning assumptions and "facts," drawing inferences, seeing implications--does not depend on literacy. So it seems that a third distinction that we must make is between literacy and thinking.

If literacy is neither the standard dialect, nor schooling, nor cognition, what else is it not? A fourth distinction is presently being asserted by Warwick Wadlington at the University of Texas. In work not yet published, Wadlington draws a distinction between reading and interpretation. All current theories of literary interpretation, he says, are based on the assumption that reading is only an act of cognition. Certainly, interpretation is a constituent of reading, and in academic cirles a legitimate goal, but reading is much more. Reading, Wadlington argues, is, in some cultures, only one of the ways that individuals "try on" and play the different roles offered to them by their society.

A fifth distinction comes from Robin Lakoff. She reminds us not to equate literacy with culture. She sees the increase in oral features in contemporary written discourse, both fictional and non-fictional, as a response to changes in the culture, not as a loss of either culture itself or of literacy.

Yet what seems to emerge from these distinctions between literacy and other related issues is some sort of connection <u>between</u> literacy and culture. Indeed, the role culture plays in

shaping literacy becomes clearer when we turn to historical studies of reading and writing. This scholarship demonstrates that a definition of literacy not only depends on the expectations of a specific culture but also varies across cultures and across time within cultures. In the next part of this presentation, Mary Trachsel will give some relevant examples.

Among the cultural determinants of literacy are religion, economics, and politics. In many societies religion has set the standard for what counts as literacy, what is used for, and who has access to it. As products of a secular society, we Americans tend to forget the powerful influence religion--specifically, Puritanism--has had, and, in fact, still does have, not only on our beliefs about the value of literacy but also on our statutes that require it.

A specific and telling example of how the economy affects literacy comes from Elizabeth Eisenstein's monumental work on the printing press. According to Eisenstein, in Renaissance Europe, the profit motive of the printers had as much to do with the spread of literacy and its changing forms--and thus its definition--as any other factor. I doubt that further examples of the ways in which economic conditions and motives either restrict or encourage literacy are necessary here. However, a question or two might be in order: In the United States, who profits from literacy? Who profits from the lack of it? Is the relationship between illiteracy and poverty causal or correlational?

As for the relationship between literacy and politics, the historical research shows again and again that literacy can either serve the established power or threaten it. Governments

always have an interest in the kinds of literacy people have access to and in the uses they put these skills to. Universally, it seems, to those to whom we wish to deny political power, we first deny literacy--for example, to women or ethnic minorities.

Thus it appears that in constructing any realistic--and therefor useful--definition of literacy, we must allow for a complex of religious, economic, and political restrictors and motivators. As Oxenham puts it, "Society makes the conditions which allow the functions of literacy--by rewarding those who ask questions or by rewarding those who don't." But in attempting to find a definition of literacy, we need to look in two more places, in literacy pedagogy and the recent ethnographies of literacy.

Many Third World literacy programs illustrate dramatically the tensions between literacy, on the one hand, and social, political and economic power, on the other. A prime example is Paolo Freire's "pedagogy of the oppressed." In his native Brazil, Freire was, in fact, so successful at using the social and economic powerlessness of his adult students to teach literacy that the government exiled him for sixteen years.

But we don't have to go to the Third World to find the successful teaching of literacy. In my native state, Eliot Wigginton showed his high school students how to use literacy to preserve the values and history of their north Georgia mountain culture. The Foxfire books, now in their eighth edition, written almost entirely by students, and selling nationally testify to the success of instruction which takes into account the social and cultural identities of the students. And we are back to Bracewell's explanation of meaning--understanding who one is and what place one is to take in the world.

As anthropolcgists and ethnographers begin to focus on literacy, we see even more clearly the cultural connection. Studies of Hispanic students in California by both Concepcion Valadez and Henry Trueba show that sometimes literacy skills are kept secret from the schools because these students see the schools as instruments of Anglo control. When, however, the schools help and allow these same students use literacy to address their own cultural, political, and personal concerns, the students take charge of their own learning, according to Trueba, and literacy flourishes. In Hawaii, Kathy Au and Cathy Jordan studied the story-telling style of native Hawaiian. What they found helped t them devise a teaching strategy that has been, apparently, able t to improve the reading of native Hawaiian children, long the least successful students in Hawaii's multi-cultural schools. At the end of this presentation, Keith Walters will discuss Shirley Brice Heath's ethnographic studies of literacy and speech in three different but related cultures in the Piedmont Carolinas. Let me just remark that Heath's work shows with clear examples and explanations how literacy and language are actually used in each community and how this determines the learning of literacy in school.

So, no, I have not answered the question I began with: What is literacy? I hope that have shared with you my belief that only by seraching the maze of the relationships of human beings and their cultures, might we begin to move toward a definition of literacy. I hope, also, that I have left you questioning the current use of literacy, both as a word and as a cultural construct.

Beth Daniell
University of Texas

Toward a Definition of Literacy

I. Literacy Crisis
Ohmann (1976)
Hirsch (1983)
Heath (1983)

II. Basic Definitions
Stubbs (1980)
Bracewell (1980)--meaning
Smith (1983)
Szwed (1981)
Chafe (1982)--reading/writing differences
Oxenham (1980)

III. Standard English
Stubbs (1980)
Trudgill (1975)
Labov (1972)
Daniell (1984)

IV. Schooling, Cognition, Culture
Scribner and Cole (1978)--the Vai
Frake (1983)
Goody and Watt (1963)--the old paradigm
Basso (1980)--Apache word games, against old paradigm
Wadlington (in preparation)--reading/interpretation distinction
Lakoff (1982)

V. Historical Studies
Oxenham (1980)
Goody and Watt (1963)
Stubbs (1980)
Resnick and Resnick (1977)
Goody (1968)
Eisenstein (1979)

VI. Literacy Pedagogy
Freire (1970)--Brazil
Mackie (1980)--about Freire
Wigginton (1972)--Georgia
Valadez (1981)--California

VII. Ethnography of literacy
Trueba (1983)--California
Au and Jordan (1981)--Hawaii
Heath (1980, 1982, 1983)--Carolinas

The two books which cover most of the issues I have raised here are Stubbs (1980) and Oxenham (1980). Oxenham emphasizes the cultural forces; Stubbs is a bit more linguistically technical.

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Walters

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